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Motivation and Beliefs in Distance Language Learning: The Case of English Learners at SRTVU, an Open University in China

Junhong Xiao

Shantou Radio and Television University, China

Stella Hurd

The Open University, UK

To date, research into the role of affective variables in language learning has been conducted almost exclusively with learners in the classroom. However, the steady increase in the numbers of distance language learners worldwide calls for the research agenda to be extended to include this group of learners, given the specific characteristics and demands that learning at a distance places on its participants. This article reports on motivation and beliefs in the distance learning and teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) at Shantou Radio and TV University (SRTVU) in China, a strand of a wider study investigating affect which replicated Hurd's (2006, 2007a, 2007b) study conducted with distance French learners at the Open University (OUUK). As indicated in the findings, interest in English was top of the list of motivating factors, while workload and assessment content/difficulty were identified as the most demotivating factors. Of all the reported ways to stay motivated, positive self-talk was the most popular. The study also reveals that the beliefs held by Chinese students about their 'ought self' do not reflect perceptions of their 'actual self' as distance language learners. The article concludes that matters such as course workload, assessment content/difficulty, and course design need to be re-evaluated in the light of the study's findings, and that it is

crucial to provide learner support in order to help reduce the gap between the 'ought self' and the 'actual self'.

Key words: motivation, learner beliefs, EFL, distance language learning, pedagogical implications

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, there has been considerable research into how affective variables such as motivation, beliefs and anxiety can impact on second language learning (Bown, 2006; Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Dörnyei, 2003; Gardner, 1985; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Hurd, 2006). Stern (1999) contends that “the affective component contributes at least as much as and often more to language learning than the cognitive skills represented by aptitude assessment” (p. 386). Arnold and Brown (2000) hold a similar view, arguing that “attention to affective aspects can lead to more effective language learning” (p. 2). There is a growing consensus that “for teaching to be effective, attention to affect is crucial” (de Andrés, 2000, p.99).

The majority of studies investigating affective variables have been conducted with second language learners in the classroom, but, as reported in Hauck and Hurd (2005), “there are fewer studies that examine the special situation of those studying in a distance context”. Given the physical absence of teacher and peer students in a distance learning context, “the affective dimensions of language learning may be particularly significant for distance learners” (Hurd, 2007a, p. 242), a view shared by many researchers in the field of distance language education (Bown, 2006; Hurd, 2008; White, 1999a; Xiao, 2007).

The investigation reported in this article was part of a wide-ranging study examining anxiety, motivation and beliefs among distance EFL students at Shantou Radio and TV University (SRTVU), a metropolitan wing of China Central Radio and Television University (CCRTVU), China's Open University, which replicated, with some modifications, Hurd's (2006, 2007a, 2007b)

study conducted with distance learners of French at the Open University, UK (OUUK). Given the extent of the findings, this article discusses only the motivation and beliefs strand; findings on anxiety are reported in a separate article (Hurd & Xiao, 2010).

Results from Hurd's (2006) study revealed that motivation, tutor feedback, and personal responsibility for learning were critical to success in distance language learning, and that the distance learning experience could in itself bring benefits to learners in terms of increased confidence and better self-regulation. The present study attempted to investigate affective variables from a different perspective, by applying the research methods used in Hurd's study to distance-taught English programmes at SRTVU. It was hoped that research concerning a new and very different distance language learning context on the other side of the world might add to the findings from Hurd, and enhance our understanding of the extent to which context can influence affective factors and learning approaches from a worldwide perspective.

LEARNER MOTIVATION AND BELIEFS IN THE DISTANCE LEARNING CONTEXT

It is widely acknowledged that motivation and beliefs, two constructs which are closely linked (Dörnyei, 2009), are crucial to language learning and may influence learning achievement (Cotterall, 1995; Dörnyei, 2003; Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003; Gardner, 1990; Horwitz, 1995; Hurd, 2007a, 2007b). Motivation concerns "the *choice* of a particular action," "the *persistence* with it," and "the *effort* expended on it" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 8). The 'choice' element, according to Dörnyei's (2003) three-stage process model of L2 motivation, involves the kind of motivation a learner needs from the outset in order to take up a course. The second stage in the process model, *executive motivation*, covers the persistence and effort needed to continue the course to its completion. This is followed by a third stage, *motivational*

retrospection, which is associated with the “retrospective *evaluation* of how things went” (p. 20). Given the acknowledged difficulty of learning a language at a distance, particularly in relation to affective considerations (Hurd, 2007a; White, 2003) and the problems associated with lack of instant feedback and measuring progress, it was hoped that an examination of these three phases of motivation might help to shed light on the learning process from the learner’s perspective and as a result provide useful information for teachers and materials writers.

From the perspective of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), learner beliefs are closely associated with the ‘actual self’, i.e., “your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you actually possess” (p. 320), the ‘ideal self’, i.e., “your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) would like you, ideally, to possess” (p. 320) and the ‘ought self’, i.e., “your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you should or ought to possess” (p. 321). Given that students might find it difficult to distinguish the ‘ideal self’ from the ‘ought self’ in a questionnaire survey, this study, as in the OUUK study, focuses on how the students perceive themselves as distance language learners, i.e., the ‘actual self’ or self-concept, and their beliefs about the qualities and attributes of successful distance language learners, i.e., the ‘ought self’, or ‘personal standards of correctness’ (p. 321). Many studies, as cited in Higgins (1987), have postulated that people are motivated to match their self-concept with their ‘personal standards of correctness’ and that achieving this match is likely to be associated with improved learning outcomes (see also Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009). “Perceived self-efficacy operates as an important contributor to academic development” (Bandura, 1993, p. 117). In other words, “students’ judgments of their own academic capabilities ... influence their academic behaviors and performances” (Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2006, p. 276). The ‘ought self’ can also be motivating in that it may encourage students to aim higher in their aspirations. To assist them in this journey, distance language educators need to examine language learners’ self-concept and ‘personal standards of correctness’ and explore

ways of minimising any discrepancies between the two.

While individual motivations may change and fluctuate throughout a course of study (Dörnyei, 2005), beliefs are considered to be a relatively stable phenomenon, but both can have a strong influence on other factors, both cognitive and affective, and on the quality of the learning experience in general. For example, it is argued that learner beliefs may affect learner strategy use and motivational maintenance (Bown, 2006; Graham, 2006; Higgins, 1987). Moreover, according to social cognitive theory, “what people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave” (Bandura, 1986, p. 25), which illustrates well the interrelationship between affect, cognition and action.

There is a dimension of learner beliefs at each stage of Dörnyei’s (2003) process model of L2 motivation. In the L2 motivational self system he describes in a later publication (Dörnyei, 2009), motivation is conceptualised as “part of the learner’s self system” (p. 29). The link between the two is also identified in Noels, Pelletier, Clement, and Vallerand (2000), whose findings demonstrate that “the more internalized the reason for L2 learning, the more comfortable and persevering students claimed to be” (p. 53). Graham (2006), too, reports that learner beliefs may influence motivational maintenance, and Bandura (1977) argues that perceived self-efficacy can affect “choice of activities and settings,” and “through expectations of eventual success, it can affect coping efforts once they are initiated” (p. 194). Numerous similar results are also quoted in Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004), and Mills et al. (2006).

The above aspects are thrown into sharp focus in the distance learning context (Bown, 2006) where frequent separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time requires learners to self-manage to a greater extent than in the classroom, and there are fewer, if any, opportunities for face-to-face teacher-student(s) and student-student(s) interaction. Distance learners may have reasons for embarking on a language course that differ from those of conventional students (they are often older with family and work commitments); their motivation may be influenced by different factors (e.g.,

career opportunities requiring a change in circumstances; lack of confidence through having been ‘out of’ learning for a considerable time); and their beliefs about language learning may be differently shaped as a result of the non-traditional learning mode (Cotterall, 1995; White, 1999a). Learner motivation and beliefs are directly implicated in learner autonomy (Cotterall, 1995; Dörnyei, 2005), which itself is a key feature of distance language learning (Hurd & Xiao, 2006). Learning experience is the third component of Dörnyei’s L2 motivational self system. These key factors are relevant to both theory and practice in the field of second language acquisition in all its contexts.

THE STUDY

This study was set up to examine the nature of motivation in distance learners of EFL, the beliefs they hold, which may impact positively or negatively on their learning, and the strategies they use to manage their affective states and stay motivated. The following questions were addressed.

Research Questions

- 1) What were the students’ reasons for studying a distance-taught English programme?
- 2) What factors motivated or demotivated their distance English learning and how did they manage to stay motivated?
- 3) What attributes did they think would best describe a good distance language learner and what did they think of themselves as a distance language learner?

English Distance Education in CCRTVU

Most CCRTVU students are aged between 20 and 40 and have work and/or family commitments. Since a key feature of the programmes offered

by CCRTVU is its technology-enhanced dimension, IT literacy is essential for students. In order to enroll on an undergraduate programme at any institution within CCRTVU, students must have finished secondary education before registering for a junior college diploma programme, and have completed a junior college diploma programme or be able to demonstrate equivalent proficiency by sitting an entrance examination before enrolling on an undergraduate programme. Once enrolled, they work with specially structured multiple media learning materials which are designed to cover the role of a teacher, functioning as “the teaching voice” (Hurd, 2001, p. 136). Face-to-face and/or online tutorials are optional, as are counseling sessions with tutors. Self-help groups, online or face-to-face, are encouraged for language practice and mutual support (For a comprehensive account, see Xiao, 2008). Class size varies from a dozen to over 50, depending on enrolment and availability of tutors. Around 40% of students drop out halfway through the programme. Students at SRTVU fit the profile of typical distance language learners at CCRTVU (Guo, 2008; Niu, Xiao, Wang, & He, 2007).

Participants

The study involved English majors at the undergraduate and junior college levels at SRTVU ($n = 550$). Participants were all part-time learners, with work commitments and/or family obligations. Of the 550 students, 408 submitted their questionnaires (see Table 1), a relatively high return rate of 74.18%.

TABLE 1
Demographic Profile of the Participants

| | Submission | Male | Female | Age (in year) | Age range |
|---------------------------|--------------|------|--------|---------------|-----------|
| Undergraduate($n=135$) | 114 (84.44%) | 18 | 96 | 25.95 | 22-49 |
| Junior college($n=415$) | 294 (70.84%) | 35 | 259 | 22.98 | 19-39 |

Note: Age (in year) = average age

Methods and Procedure

In Hurd's study ($n = 500$), both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to investigate the language learner experience at a distance. Following a pilot with 100 students, two questionnaires--Distance Language Learning and Beliefs-Anxiety-Motivation--were refined and adapted to provide broad insights into learner perceptions of personality, anxiety, motivation, roles and approaches. These were followed up by think-aloud verbal protocols and semi-structured interviews to investigate these aspects in more depth. The two questionnaires from Hurd's study were adopted for the present study but were re-designed to form one single questionnaire, with adaptations to fit the specific features of the distance English language learning context in China. For example, the section on personality traits in the Hurd study was replaced by a modified set of attributes and abilities used in a previous study (Hurd & Xiao, 2006). This change was informed by the researchers' ELT experience in China in that some of Hurd's items which were relevant to UK students were not likely to be associated with language learning by Chinese students. The adapted questionnaire, as in the original, comprised three sections: motivation, beliefs, and anxiety (See Appendix for the questionnaire sections on motivation and beliefs). Students were asked to tick from a list of choices and in some cases to explain their choice. The questionnaire was piloted with 10 undergraduates and 21 junior college students of English and revisions were made according to their feedback, in order to make the questionnaire as clear and concise as possible. For instance, in the pilot questionnaire, students were asked to explain first why they found it easier or more difficult to maintain motivation learning at a distance than being in the classroom, and second why they felt their motivation had fluctuated. As their answers were very similar to both questions, the first question was dropped from the main questionnaire. The revised questionnaire was administered over a period of two months, from October to November, 2008, at the face-to-face tutorials.

The questionnaire survey was followed one week later by semi-structured interviews so that topics of interest could be further explored and methods

and data triangulated. Based on criterion sampling (Patton, 2001), 33 interviewees were selected from the questionnaire survey participants to allow a balance in terms of programme level, year group, gender, and overall examination results. Since not all the students were available for face-to-face interviews, the interviews were conducted in three different ways. Six students were interviewed face to face, 13 via email and 14 through Tencent QQ, an Internet-based instant messaging tool, widely used in China. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by the main researcher after face-to-face tutorials, and these were recorded and transcribed. Those who were not available for face-to-face interviews had the option of email ‘interviews’, which involved written answers to the questions, or instant message interviews at a time that was convenient for both parties to be online simultaneously. The interview question for this strand of the study, as in Hurd’s study (2006), used White’s (1994) yoked subject procedure, “in which students are asked to put themselves in the place of a new learner” (Hurd, 2006, p. 317): “What advice could you give to a new distance English learner to help him/her get the most out of a distance-taught English programme?” A content analysis was made of the students’ explanations for their choices and their responses to the interview question. First, the researchers independently worked out a checklist after preliminary examination of the data. Then, differences between the checklists were negotiated until consensus was reached. Finally, the researchers used the agreed checklist to code the data independently. The inter-rater reliability was 90.85% and consensus was achieved through further discussion.

FINDINGS

Reasons for Studying a Distance-taught English Programme

Students were asked to tick from a list *all* their reasons as well as the most important one for enrolling on the programme, and to give any other reasons

they might have that were not listed.

FIGURE 1
Reasons for Doing a Distance-taught English Programme

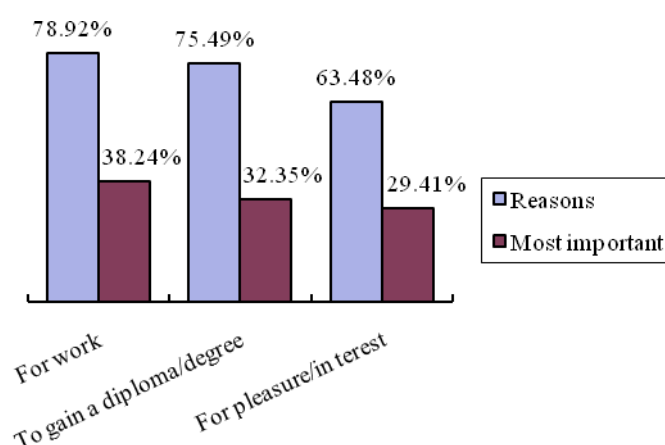


Figure 1 shows that, of the three named reasons, the most important, both for ‘all reasons’ and for ‘most important reason’, was ‘for work’, followed by ‘to gain a diploma/degree’ and ‘for pleasure/interest’. Since China is playing an increasingly important role in world affairs, a more than basic level of proficiency in English is an important prerequisite for job promotion or a better-paid job. Over three quarters of the students enrolled on English programmes ‘for work’ and/or ‘to gain a diploma/degree’ (for a better-paid job), and 70.59% selected one or the other of these as the most important reason. However, nearly two thirds of the sample were also learning English ‘for pleasure/interest’, and some offered other reasons for learning, among which were living life to the full (24.75%), keeping up with world fashions (22.55%), travelling abroad (18.63%), and making friends with English speakers from other countries (15.93%).

Motivation Maintenance

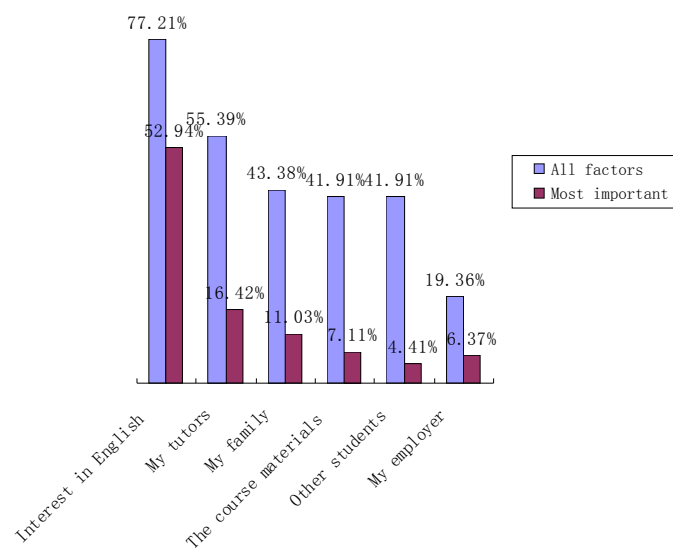
When asked to report whether they found it easier or more difficult to maintain motivation learning at a distance than in the classroom, 72.30% reported the latter, an unsurprising result given the relative lack of interaction and immediate feedback, as mentioned earlier. This result echoes the findings from a previous study that Chinese students are not generally comfortable with autonomous learning (Hurd & Xiao, 2006).

Motivating and Demotivating Factors

Participants were asked to choose from a list *all* the factors that kept them motivated and to select the most important one, explaining their choice if possible. They were also invited to add other factors that applied to them and were not listed.

Figure 2 demonstrates students' ability to maintain motivation in a variety of ways. Of all the motivating factors, interest in English was top of the list, leading the other factors by over 20%. Tutors were rated second, followed by family, then course materials and other students. Given that one of the three specifically named reasons for enrolling on the English programmes was interest in English (rated first by 63.48% of the students and reported to be the most important reason by 29.41%), it was not surprising that this was again identified as a major motivating factor, as well as the most important factor by 77.21% and 52.94% of the students respectively. Moreover, since Chinese students are used to being 'spoon-fed' at school and have excessive reliance on the teacher as the authoritative figure (Hurd & Xiao, 2006), it was expected that the teacher's role in maintaining learner motivation would be rated as important, and this was the case with over half the participants (55.39%).

FIGURE 2
Motivating Factors



Findings from the study also demonstrate the importance of family, course materials, and other learners. These elements are, to some extent, stakeholders in students' distance learning experience. In view of the relative isolation of the learning experience in contrast to that of the classroom, and the consequent need for distance learners to develop ways of managing their learning, these contacts are of the highest importance in helping students to maintain their motivation. Additional motivating factors given by students included confidence in learning English at a distance (15.20%), a perceived increase in personal attributes conducive to successful language learning (13.97%) and anticipated material benefits (12.25%).

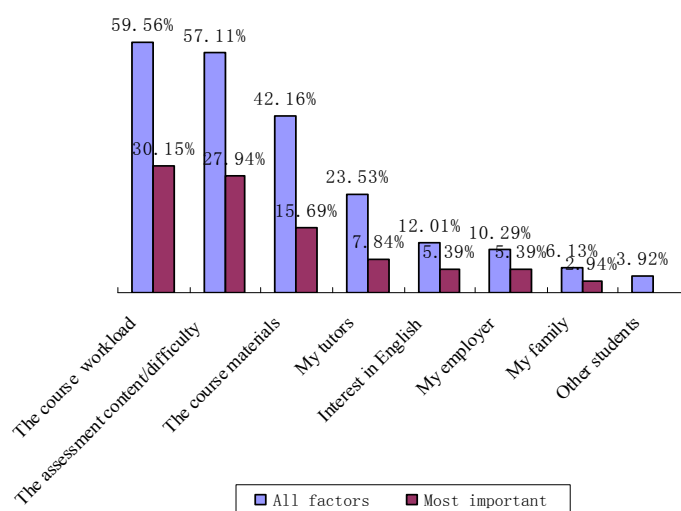
Students' explanations for their choices in the open-ended comments on the questionnaire items provided some new insights into motivational maintenance. First, 75.00% of them explained that interest in English and Western cultures was instrumental in maintaining motivation and increasing autonomy. This interest could turn isolated learning into an enjoyable learning experience and bring about a greater sense of achievement. Second, 51.96% acknowledged that, despite the infrequency of contact, their teachers were able to arouse and maintain students' interest in the subject matter through tutorials, both face-to-face and online, by creating a lively learning atmosphere, and providing effective guidance, moderate pressure, immediate feedback and positive encouragement. Third, 38.97% claimed that they would not have embarked on such a learning experience fraught with so many difficulties without the sacrifice, in one form or another, of family members. They felt that, unless they worked hard, they would fall short of family expectations. Fourth, 37.99% stated that the course materials catered for their professional needs and satisfied their desire to learn about Western countries. As for peer support, its importance was recognized by 35.78% of the students.

The students were then asked to identify demotivating factors and to give explanations where possible.

The two most demotivating factors were workload and assessment content/difficulty (see Figure 3). In explaining their choice of these items in the questionnaire, 51.96% of the students complained that the course workload was too heavy because they could not devote the necessary time for study, hence they found the course assessment demanding. Course materials were rated overall second: 20.90% of students explained that they found it difficult to cope with course materials designed to facilitate autonomous learning, while 18.60% complained that they did not find the course content very useful for their specific needs. Moreover, those whose English was poor found the level of language too high. Other factors included too much pressure from teachers, decreasing interest in English, lack of support from employers, and too many distractions at home. Frustration with lack of

progress (40.93%), insufficient practice opportunities (36.76%), and lack of personal perseverance and self-discipline (35.05%) were among the ‘other’ elements - cited in the open-ended comments section - which were negatively correlated with motivation in the study.

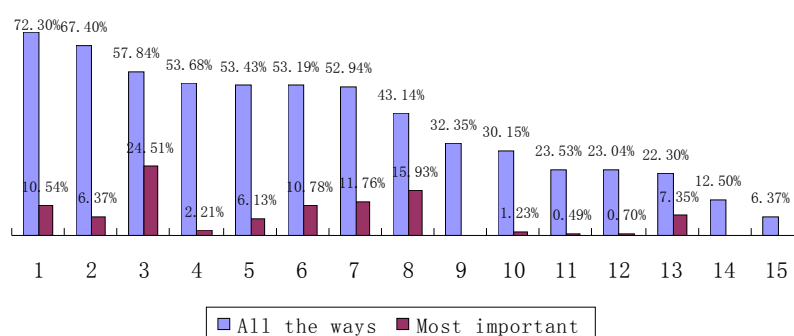
FIGURE 3
Demotivating Factors



Ways to Maintain Motivation

Students were then asked to indicate from a list *all* the ways they kept themselves motivated as well as the most important one. They were invited to contribute additional strategies they used, if appropriate.

FIGURE 4
Ways to Keep Motivated



Note:

Watching English films

Listening to or singing English songs

Positive self-talk

Listening to English news on the radio or watching it on the TV

Reading English (e.g. English newspaper, magazine, novel, etc.)

Talking to friends in English

Attending face-to-face tutorials as often as possible

Keeping in touch with English native speakers (e.g. email correspondence, BBS or MSN communication, etc.)

Seeking support from other students

Seeking support from my tutor

Joining learning groups

Keeping up to date with what's going on in the UK or USA and other English-speaking countries

Setting goals and keeping them under review

Seeking support from my employer

Seeking support from my family

Figure 4 shows how students made use of a number of strategies to stay motivated. Of the fifteen named strategies, seven were identified by over half the cohort, and another six by over a fifth (ranging from 22.30% to 43.14%). It should be noted that some of the suggested ways to maintain motivation

were unpopular with students, especially seeking support from their families (6.37%). Additional strategies included playing games in English (11.03%), face-to-face communication with English speakers from other countries (10.54%), reflecting on personal learning experience (7.84%), and noting down feelings about distance learning (5.39%).

Five of the named ways (positive self-talk, keeping in touch with English native speakers electronically, attending face-to-face tutorials as often as possible, talking to friends in English, and watching English films) were rated as the most important ways to stay motivated by over 10% of the students (ranging from 10.54% to 24.51%); three were not selected by any of the participants (seeking help from other students, from employer, and from family), and the remaining seven received low ratings (ranging from 0.49% to 7.35%). Overall, it would appear that students were not at all keen on seeking help from others despite the recognised value of this strategy.

Motivation Fluctuation and Related Effects

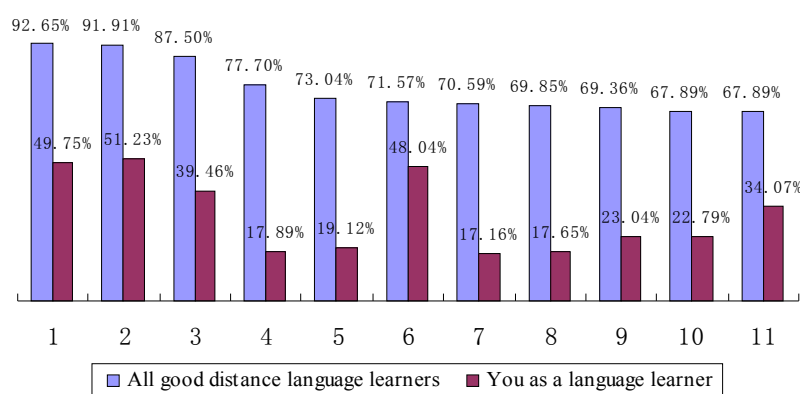
Around half the students (48.53%) reported fluctuations in motivation. In the open-ended comments section, students attributed drops in motivation levels to the following factors: increased job and/or family responsibilities (44.85%), daunting course work (44.36%), difficulty in sustaining motivation over a number of years (42.89%), too much pressure from having to develop an autonomous approach to learning (38.24%), unsatisfactory tutorials (29.90%), unsuccessful learning outcomes (25.00%), lack of self-confidence (25.00%), lack of willpower (23.77%), decreasing interest in English (20.83%), and few chances to use English at work or in daily life (19.11%). Only 31.37% reported an increase in motivation. Their explanations covered progress in English (30.64%), mastery of learning strategies (29.66%), diversity in learning activities (29.90%), fascinating and useful course materials (28.43%), satisfactory tutorials (28.17%), tutor and peer encouragement (27.45%), increased confidence (26.72%), and accommodation to autonomous learning (26.72%). Participants were then asked whether they

had at any point wanted to drop out. 73.77% said that they had never thought of abandoning the programme. Moreover, when asked whether they would choose learning English at a distance if there were other options, 63.48% gave a positive response.

Learner Beliefs

As argued earlier, learner beliefs can strongly influence anxiety levels and motivational maintenance. For this reason, students were asked first to identify from a given list *all* the attributes that would describe a good distance language learner, and then select those that applied to them.

FIGURE 5
Learner Beliefs



Note:

- Maintaining enthusiasm/motivation
- Confidence in being successful at English
- Persistence in following the curriculum
- Being good at taking the initiative
- Willingness to take risks (even if make mistakes)
- Willingness to accept constructive criticism

Ability to fit English study around other commitments
Ability to make good decisions for myself about my English study (e.g. what to learn,
how to learn, the pace, etc.)
Being self-aware and reflective
Ability to get on with other learners
Ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses

In terms of describing the ‘good’ distance language learner, all the suggested attributes received high rating from the students, ranging from 67.89% to 93.65% (see Figure 5). The top three were maintaining enthusiasm/motivation (93.65%), confidence in being successful at English (91.91%) and persistence in following the curriculum (87.50%). Nevertheless, they did not attach as much importance to metacognitive skills, such as ability to fit English study around other commitments (70.59%), ability to make good decisions about English study (69.85%), being self-aware and reflective (69.36%), ability to get on with other learners (67.89%), and ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses (67.89%). The findings, nevertheless, reveal that they had a fairly clear perception of what made a ‘good’ distance language learner.

However, beliefs about themselves as distance language learners were not as optimistic. Only about half the students claimed they were confident about their distance language learning (51.23%), could maintain motivation (49.75%), and were willing to accept constructive criticism (48.04%). As for the remaining attributes, the figures were even lower, with four of them rated by less than 20% of the participants, i.e. willingness to take risks (19.12%), being good at taking the initiative (17.89%), ability to make good decisions about English study (17.65%), and ability to fit English study around other commitments (17.16%). The discrepancies between the ‘actual self’ and the ‘ought self’ (Higgins, 1987) were striking.

Learning Advice

As in the Hurd (2006) study, interviewees were asked to offer advice to new learners in order to help them get the most out of a distance-taught

language programme. Several themes were identified from the interview data. All 33 interviewees cited the teacher's facilitative role, acknowledging that tutorials were important and useful and that the teacher's suggestions should be taken seriously. 93.94% of them highlighted persistence, confidence, and self-regulation as key attributes for distance language learning. They argued that these attributes were extremely important for motivational maintenance in a learning context characterized by separation of teacher and student in space and/or time. 90.90% agreed that distance learners should try to make use of any language practice opportunities available, both formal and informal, because "you cannot possibly expect to master English by reading the course books or attending the tutorial." This particular participant continued: "You should take the initiative to look for practice opportunities, which, thanks to scientific and technological advancements, are more easily available nowadays." 84.85% of the interviewees claimed that setting realistic goals, both immediate and long-term, could help learners to stay motivated, having learned from personal experience that unattainable goals undermine confidence and can be very demotivating. 81.82% emphasized the necessity of reflecting on which learning techniques work best for each individual learner, and using them as much as possible. They added that the most reliable way to identify "good practice" suitable for individual learners is "to ponder upon, reflect on, and/or reason about" personal learning habits since no learning method is a "one size fits all". 75.76% of the interviewees suggested working with other learners to practise, review or share information, maintaining that a language cannot be learned entirely on your own. 72.73% highlighted the importance of being able to schedule in time to meet different obligations and commitments. They advised that you can never continue to maintain motivation unless you balance your time between work and other commitments, including work and leisure pursuits.

Overall, findings from the interviews and open-ended questions reinforced quantitative findings from the questionnaire survey in a number of key areas: knowledge of the 'ought self' in terms of the attributes necessary for successful distance language learning; learning advice including strategies to

sustain motivation; and the facilitative role of the tutor.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study emphasized the interrelationship between the main factors explored: motivation, beliefs, and tutor and learner roles, all of which work together to influence the distance language learning process. A number of issues were raised which are explored in the sections below.

Choice Motivation

Results from the study bear testimony to the argument that “a student’s total motivation is most frequently a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation” (Erhman et al., 2003, p. 320). In the present study, extrinsic motivation, that is, learning English in order to “achieve some instrumental end, such as earning a reward” (Noels et al., 2000, p. 39), was stronger than intrinsic motivation, whereby learning English is “enjoyable and satisfying” (p. 38). The choice motivation of SRTVU students is mainly extrinsic, although intrinsic motivation has increased in recent years, as China experiences social and economic change. This increase was also confirmed by additional reasons offered by participants, which were mostly intrinsic in nature. This is evidence of the role of contextual factors in shaping motivation orientation (Gan et al., 2004).

One conclusion that can be made is that CCRTVU needs to be more flexible in its curriculum by offering more choices to satisfy different needs, in other words, balancing extrinsic and intrinsic demands. The current curriculum is overwhelmingly vocational in nature (Xiao, 2007) and this may explain why some students do not have a stronger sense of the “driving forces”, i.e., “energy that is in the direction of the intended goal” (Lewin, 1951, cited in Macintyre, 2007, p. 571).

Motivation Maintenance and Retrospection

Dörnyei (2005, p. 16) contends that motivation “is characterized by regular (re)appraisal and balancing of the various internal and external influences to which the individual is exposed.” The findings of the questionnaire survey demonstrate that students attributed motivation maintenance to intrinsic factors, in this case, interest in English, far more than other factors. Persistence, confidence, and self-regulation, which fall into the intrinsic category, were also frequently cited in the interviews as key attributes for distance language learning. However, in the light of the specific features of the Chinese learning culture, where autonomous learning is not the norm (Hurd & Xiao, 2006), it was not unexpected that the role of tutor was cited by 55.39% in the questionnaire survey as a motivating factor, and that the facilitative role of the tutor was acknowledged by all the participants in the follow-up interviews. This result echoes those reported in other Asian studies (Aida, 1994; Gan, 2004). The motivating roles of family, course materials, other students, and prospective material benefits were also clearly recognized. Overall, this seems to reinforce Hurd’s (2005) argument that for distance language learners “motivation, at least in the early stages, is largely intrinsic, although extrinsic elements may come into play as aspirations to achieve higher qualifications begin to emerge” (p. 9).

Course workload, assessment content and/or difficulty, and course materials ranked highest among demotivating factors. Moreover, students did not feel comfortable seeking help from “significant others” (i.e., tutor, family, employer and other students), possibly “because they might view help-seeking as a manifestation of weakness, immaturity, or even incompetence” (Aida, 1994, p. 164). Other demotivating factors, as reported earlier, included both extrinsic and intrinsic elements.

Despite the difficulty in learning English at a distance and the decline in motivation, as reported by the SRTVU students, the high numbers of those who had never thought of dropping out and who expressed their readiness to learn English in a distance mode, even if other options were available, were

impressive. These positive responses may be partly attributed to the fact that many students had a wide repertoire of strategies they used to sustain motivation, for example, taking advantage of out-of-class opportunities, self-encouragement, making the most of opportunities to meet with their tutors and peer students, and using certain metacognitive skills such as reflection. The value of these strategies was also stressed in the interviews. Nevertheless, there were several strategies that students did not use and which might have had benefits for them, for example, seeking help as mentioned earlier, learning with other students, and setting goals and keeping them under review. It is interesting to note, however, that in the interviews, many students recommended the last two strategies to distance language beginners. The promotion of these under-used strategies should be a priority for distance language educators.

Learner Beliefs

There is a generally held view that learner beliefs have a profound impact on the learning behaviour of language learners (Bandura, 1986; Cotterall, 1995; Dörnyei, 2009; Hurd, 2005; Williams & Burden, 1999). As in the OUUK study, the present study focused on the distinction between the ‘actual self’ and the ‘ought self’. The ‘ought self’ is potentially motivating in that it may help reduce the gap between the ‘actual self’ or the perceived self-concept, and the self that is aspired to (Higgins, 1987) although it may be demotivating if the gap to be bridged seems too wide. From the attributes identified to describe a ‘good’ distance language learner, and the advice given to new learners in the follow-up interviews, it is reasonable to conclude that participants had a good understanding of the ‘ought self’ although metacognitive skills, essential to distance learners, were somewhat undervalued in comparison with enthusiasm/motivation, confidence, and persistence.

Self-concept belief, according to Dörnyei (2003), is one of the main influences on motivational retrospection. “How we see ourselves as learners

affects our approach to tackling new learning tasks and our overall attitude to whatever it is we are expected to learn” (Seifert, 1997, quoted in Williams & Burden, 1999, pp. 193-194). However, findings indicate that the Chinese cohort had relatively low levels of self-esteem and lacked certain key attributes in terms of their ‘actual self’. Only about half the students claimed to have confidence in being successful in learning English, stay enthusiastic/motivated, and be willing to accept constructive criticism. In general, they appeared to lack many of the skills essential to becoming better distance language learners.

The mismatch between the ‘ought self’ and the ‘actual self’ was marked in the study. Since “incompatible self-beliefs produce emotional problems” (Higgins, 1987, p. 332), action needs to be taken to narrow the gap. In this case, individual (i.e., student and teacher) and institutional efforts may contribute significantly to a sense of ‘actual self’ as distance language learners, by boosting levels of confidence, enthusiasm, persistence, and self-awareness.

CONCLUSION

This study yielded some useful insights into the motivational orientation of distance EFL learning in China. It highlighted important relationships between affective factors and their role in sustaining the learning of a discipline whose social nature is at odds with the distance mode of instruction. Findings from the study indicate that choice motivation is generally contextualised, and point to the necessity for “a significant change in roles, beliefs, values, and assumptions on the part of the learner” (Bown, 2006, p. 641), the teacher and the institution. The study also emphasised the motivating roles of other people in supporting students over their course of study at a distance. Issues of concern were highlighted, whose solutions require the joint efforts of learner, teacher, and institution in an endeavour to improve the design and provision of distance language learning programmes.

From an institutional perspective, CCRTVU overall needs to re-evaluate matters such as course workload, assessment content and/or difficulty, and course design. This might involve, for example, spreading the curriculum over a longer period of time, and adopting a modular system of teaching to strengthen the links between courses and avoid repetition in content (Xiao, 2009). It would also entail encouraging diversity in course assessment, instead of placing so much weight on the end-of-course examinations (Xiao, 2008). Moreover, more effective teacher training and staff development are needed to ensure that tutors have all the requisite skills for carrying out their jobs effectively. All these factors may positively affect students' interest in English and help sustain motivation.

From a tutor perspective, learner support in all forms is "of paramount importance" (Hurd, 2007a, p. 242). First, students need to be trained in metacognitive skills such as planning, prioritising, and self-monitoring. These are particularly important for adult learners who often have to juggle many roles simultaneously (White, 1999b). The skills required for self-direction can also be promoted through adopting positive attitudes towards the learning process and employing "a set of interlocking, related, and mutually supportive strategies" (Ehrman et al., 2003, p. 316) to facilitate distance language learning. Second, no effort should be spared to encourage students to try out different ways of motivating themselves, and reflect on ways which work best for them. The ability to employ effective learning strategies may increase self-sufficiency (Ehrman et al., 2003), which in turn can influence how hard and how long students will succeed in pursuing their goals. Third, effective measures should be taken to encourage learners to develop the habit of seeking help as it can help to lower anxiety and bring about better learning outcomes (Aida, 1994). Fourth, counselling is needed to counteract the effects of intrinsic demotivating factors so that students can "take positive self-control and change negative self-views" (Gan, 2004, p. 401), and thus become more self-sufficient and self-directed.

The study used self-report instruments to measure distance language learners' affective states. These instruments "may be inaccurate if learners do

not report truthfully or cannot remember their thinking” (Chamot, 2005, p. 115) although the assurance of confidentiality, anonymity, opportunities for explanation and follow-up interview may help to minimise possible misrepresentations. Despite this possible limitation, we believe that the findings from the study provided some important insights into affect in distance language learning in the Chinese context which could be a solid starting point for further research focusing more closely on student drop-out and the reasons behind it, support from ‘significant others’ in motivational maintenance, and the interplay between motivation and beliefs.

Differences in social contexts, learning cultures, and levels of experience in distance language education are likely to influence learner motivation and beliefs in a variety of ways. By extending the findings from Hurd (2006) and revealing new insights about distance language learning in a different culture, the SRTVU study offers a broader perspective of affect in distance language learning which in turn contributes to a greater understanding of the issues involved.

THE AUTHORS

Junhong Xiao is Professor of English at Shantou Radio and Television University, China. His current research interests cover linguistics, applied linguistics and open and distance learning. His recent publications include *Teaching English at a distance in China's Radio and Television Universities* (2008) and *Paired Peer Review in a Distance-taught EFL Writing Course* (2008).

Email: frankxjh@gmail.com

Stella Hurd is an external doctoral supervisor at the Open University, UK, having recently retired as a Senior Lecturer in French. Her current research interests include learner autonomy, learner difference, learning strategies, and metacognition and affect in distance language learning. Her publications

include journal articles, edited books and book chapters on all these topics. She has also co-edited three books on adult language learning.
Email: m.s.hurd@open.ac.uk

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APPENDIX

1. Motivation

- 1) Why are you doing this English programme?

In the first column, please indicate **all** your reasons by ticking the relevant box or boxes. In the second column, tick the **most important** reason

| | All reasons | Most important reason |
|--|-------------|-----------------------|
| to gain a degree (for a better-paid job) | | |
| for pleasure/interest | | |
| for work | | |

Others (please specify) _____

- 2) Are you finding it easier or more difficult to maintain motivation learning at a distance than in the classroom?

- 3) If you are managing to stay motivated, to what would you attribute this?

In the first column, please indicate **all** the factors that have helped you to stay motivated by ticking the relevant box or boxes. In the second column, tick the **most important** factor. If possible, please explain your choice(s).

| | All factors | Most Important factor | Explain |
|----------------------|-------------|-----------------------|---------|
| The course materials | | | |
| My tutors | | | |
| Other students | | | |
| My family | | | |
| My employer | | | |
| Interest in English | | | |

Others (please specify) _____

- 4) If you are not managing to stay motivated, to what would you attribute this?

In the first column, please indicate **all** the factors that have caused

your motivation levels to drop by ticking the relevant box or boxes. In the second column, tick the **most important** factor. If possible, please explain your choice(s).

| | All factors | Most Important factor | Explain |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|---------|
| The course materials | | | |
| The assessment content / difficulty | | | |
| The course workload | | | |
| My tutors | | | |
| Other students | | | |
| My family | | | |
| My employer | | | |
| Interest in English | | | |

Other (please specify) _____

- 5) Have you developed any particular ways to keep yourself motivated throughout your study of the English programme? If yes, please indicate **all** your ways, in the first column, to keep yourself motivated by ticking the relevant box or boxes and tick the **most important** way in the second column.

| | All | Most important |
|--|-----|----------------|
| Keeping in touch with English native speakers (e.g. email correspondence, BBS or MSN communication, etc.) | | |
| Listening to English news on the radio or watching it on the TV | | |
| Watching English films | | |
| Reading English (e.g. English newspaper, magazine, novel, etc.) | | |
| Listening to or singing English songs | | |
| Talking in English to friends | | |
| Keeping up to date with what's going on in the UK or USA and other English-speaking countries | | |
| Setting goals and keeping them under review | | |
| Positive self-talk (e.g. some bits of the courses are bound to be more difficult than others; I shall be so pleased if I stick | | |

| |
|--|
| it out; I shall be disappointed with myself if I give up now; I really enjoy the video activities in Book 1 and there will be more of them, etc) |
| Attending face-to-face tutorials as often as possible |
| Joining learning groups |
| Seeking support from my tutor |
| Seeking support from other students |
| Seeking support from my family |
| Seeking support from my employer |

Others (please specify) _____

- 6) Has your motivation fluctuated so far during your study of the English programme? If possible, please explain your situation.
- 7) Have you at any point wanted to give up studying English with us? If possible, please explain your situation.
- 8) If there are other options, will you choose learning English at a distance? If possible, please explain your answer.

2. Beliefs/attitudes

Which characteristics would you say describe a good distance language learner? Please tick in the first column **all the characteristics**, which, in your opinion, apply to **all good distance language learners**. And tick in the second column **all the characteristics** which apply to you and which you feel have helped you to become a better distance language learner.

| Characteristics | All good distance language learners | You as a language learner |
|---|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Confidence in being successful at English | | |
| Persistence in following the curriculum | | |
| Maintaining enthusiasm/motivation | | |
| Ability to make good decisions for myself about my English study (e.g. what to learn, how to learn, the pace, etc.) | | |

| |
|---|
| Ability to fit English study around other commitments |
| Ability to get on with other learners |
| Ability to assess own strengths and weaknesses |
| Willingness to accept constructive criticism |
| Willingness to take risks (even if make mistakes) |
| Being self-aware and reflective |
| Being good at taking the initiative |
| Others (please specify) _____ |